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ENGAGING PRISONERS IN EDUCATION: REDUCING RISK AND RECIDIVISM

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Abstract

Engaging prisoners in education is one of a range of measures that could alleviate security risk in prisons. For prisoners, one of the main challenges with incarceration is monotony, often leading to frustration, raising the risk of injury for staff and other prisoners. This article suggests that prisoner engagement in education may help to alleviate security risk in prisons through relieving monotony and reducing re-offending by promoting critical thinking skills. It discusses some of the challenges to accessing higher levels of education in prisons and argues that if education was considered for its risk-reducing potential and measured accordingly, then some of those challenges could be reduced. It concludes with a discussion of projects undertaken in Australia and the UK that introduce digital technologies into prisons to allow greater access to the self-paced higher levels of education which could help realize the benefits of reduced risk and decreased recidivism rates.

Introduction

Prison security is a topic of growing community and political concern. Regular news reports highlight prisoner unrest in response to overcrowding, smoking bans and other frustrations (for example see Calligeros & Willingham, 2015; Philipson, 2015; Tan, 2015). On a day-to-day basis, prisoners who have difficulty adapting to the “pains of imprisonment”, namely

boredom, conflicts with staff and concerns for one's safety, can be much more likely to resort to serious prison misbehavior and violence (Rocheleau, 2013). In addition, prison violence results in increased workplace injuries and work time lost to chronic health conditions such as depression and anxiety for prison staff (Finney, Stergiopoulos, Hensel, Bonato, & Dewa, 2013). The cost to the prison estate is substantial and effective ways of mitigating risk through reducing prisoner misconduct is an imperative. Researchers suggest that at least one effective way to counter this anti-social acting out could be to fill prisoners' days with constructive activity, including education (Rocheleau, 2013).

The Standard Guidelines for Corrections in Australia (2012), recommends that prisoners be provided with access to education and vocational training primarily as a way of helping them develop skills and abilities to support reduced re-offending upon release from custody (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2012). However, there is little understanding of the impact on security risks of prisoner participation in such programs. Much research into prison education is focused on individual learning benefits (for example see Batiuk, Lahm, McKeever, Wilcox, & Wilcox, 2005) and there is less known about the impact of educational programs on prison operations, including the management of risk (Brazzell, Crayton, Mukamal, Solomon, & Lindahl, 2009). If prisoner engagement with education can be shown to reduce the security risk of prisons, an alternative measure of the success of these programs could be to measure changes in prisoner misconduct, both prisoner-to-prisoner and prisoner-to-prison officer.

How education could mitigate risk

'Education has made me more well-behaved ... it's had a calming effect ... gave me something else to think about ... stopped me acting so impulsively ... gave me some long term thoughts ...'

*Damien, undergraduate incarcerated student
Maryborough Correctional Centre, Australia, 31 July 2015*

In a recent survey in the United Kingdom, 81 per cent of prisoner respondents claimed that they participated in study to occupy their time and relieve monotony, 69 per cent said that distance education helped them to cope with prison and 40 per cent said that it helped a lot (Taylor, 2014). This is particularly significant for those prisoners with long sentences or with mental health issues. Though many prisons emphasize vocational education over higher education, mostly provided through distance-learning, there are many benefits to be realized from engaging prisoners in this way. Recent longitudinal research by one author has found that higher levels of education can transform some prisoners, making them more risk-averse. Prisoners who had studied through distance learning had increased cognitive ability and new pro-social thinking patterns, giving them the ability to express themselves more effectively and negotiate agreed outcomes without having to resort to violence (Pike, 2014). Moreover, student-tutor relationships are usually characterized by respect, understanding, care and positive expectations which reduce anti-social cognition and help to build anti-criminal identity. Thus, engaging in higher levels of education provides powerful cognitive and social learning which are fundamental to the Risk–Need–Responsivity (RNR) model of rehabilitation (Andrews, 2006; Andrews & Dowden, 2007).

The provision of education could assist prison management to address issues of ‘prisonization’, the process whereby prisoners become acculturated to the negative values of the prison sub-culture (Brazzell et al., 2009). Earlier studies have revealed the potential for prison education programs to create positive institutional cultures. These changes were thought to be brought about by prisoner exposure to positive civilian role models (educators), because prisoners are kept occupied (and “out of trouble”) (Adams et al., 1994), and through

improved decision-making abilities and pro-social values (Brazzell et al, 2009). Prison management often encourage prisoner enrolment in education because it can provide an incentive for good behavior; and is thought to produce more responsible, mature individuals who have a calming influence on other prisoners and on prison officers (Ross, 2009). Theorists suggest that improvements in cognitive processing, communication abilities and enhancement of long term prospects afforded by education and training may result in pro-social behaviors, emotional maturity, empathy and control (Bandura, 1977; Knowles, 1975; Mezirow, 2000a). For prisoners, these qualities have been linked to desistance from crime (Farrall and Maruna, 2004) and they may result in a reduction in the frequency and severity of assaults within the prison. Using education may therefore improve security outcomes in a prison and contribute to a 'dynamic security' mediated by human factors (Wynne, 2001). However, providing the right education, which develops cognitive and social learning, comes with many challenges and these are discussed in the next section.

Challenges to the provision of education in prisons

Though there is an increasing evidence base that suggests that participation in education by prisoners may help reduce security risk, there are a number of factors that exacerbate the education challenges of many prisons. The prison learning environment must balance the competing need for security with that of rehabilitation through the provision of education, training and mandated behavioral programs (e.g. drug and alcohol programs). Typically, rates of prisoner engagement with education are low, particularly in the first years of a sentence or while awaiting sentencing. There are many explanations for low levels of prisoner participation in education and training which may be related to previous negative experiences and readiness for learning. However three important reasons related specifically to the prison context are 1) availability, attitude and perceptions of prison staff (i.e., those in authority); 2)

the prison environment itself; and 3) limited program availability (focusing only on basic literacy and numeracy programs) (Gillies et al., 2014). Prison officers are in day-to-day contact with prisoners and their attitudes towards them affects how successfully prisoners complete education or training programs. Prison officers have the capacity to enhance or undermine the goals of the prison where they work and to either motivate or de-motivate prisoners (Kjelsberg, Skoglund, & Rustad, 2007).

Research shows that dosage is a significant factor influencing program effectiveness, and that continuous participation for a specified period is essential for success (Cho & Tyler, 2008). Yet the needs of the prison frequently take precedence over the need for program continuity, even when the prisoner is willing to engage with education. The tough-on-crime policies of many governments contributes to overcrowding of facilities, making prisoner accommodation and movement difficult. Based on system-wide needs, prisoners may be transferred to another facility with little advance notice, and the new prison may or may not offer comparable educational programming (Brazzell et al., 2009).

Lack of learning support and cultural capital exacerbate poor enrolment and retention rates in education. Incarcerated students are very often first-in-family to participate in post-secondary education. They are frequently participating without any support from their families or communities, lacking the cultural capital that would normalize their participation. In addition, the acquisition of digital literacy skills are key for post-release employment or education but impose new and often unmet demands on disadvantaged segments of the community including those in incarceration (Garrido, Sullivan, & Gordon, 2010; Lockard & Rankins-Robertson, 2011). In the case of learning communities, the most effective educational programming contains intensive small-group interaction and offers a learning community as

an alternative to the often anti-social communities within prisons (Adams et al., 1994; Batiuk et al., 2005). Without enrichment and reinforcement that stem from being a member of a learning community, students taking education programs in prisons are socially and materially disadvantaged with outcomes for these learners heavily shaped by negative peer pressure and the highly unpredictable nature of prison life (Watts, 2010).

Victims' rights groups encourage a public attitude that favors punishment rather than rehabilitation through education (Drake & Henley, 2014). Consequently, there are few objections to massive cuts to education funding in prisons (Czerniawski, 2015). Reduction in funding of both corrections and of education has put pressure on prison education, leading to reduced staff support, decreased offerings and shorter duration of programs.

Measuring the success of prison education

The success of education and training programs in prisons is usually couched in terms of reductions in recidivism. Certainly, recent research suggests that prisoners who participate in education are indeed less likely to re-offend (Davis et al, 2013; Ministry of Justice, 2013). However, this form of measurement is problematic given that there is no agreed definition of recidivism between jurisdictions, rates are measured over a period of years (Andersen & Skardhamar, 2015), and other factors aside from education, including police activity, significantly impact on an individual's inclination to reoffend (Dempsey, 2013). This uncertainty around the definition of recidivism means that this measure is frequently manipulated to reinforce whatever argument is being proposed (Andersen & Skardhamar, 2015). A recent report into police and community safety in Queensland, Australia called for a better measure of prison performance that took into account those who were working directly in and with the system. In turn, it was indicated, these measures could be used to better

inform the public on the efficacy of corrective services (Dempsey, 2013). Given this, a more appropriate and useful way to measure the success of education and training within prisons, could be to monitor the rate of assaults in custody. Prisons in Australia and the UK report against a number of key performance indicators including assaults in custody and percentage of eligible prisoners enrolled in education and training (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2015; Ministry of Justice, 2015).

Rates of assault, both prisoner on prisoner and prisoner on prison officer, offers an alternative measure to recidivism to ascertain the efficacy of prison education and training programs, favoring improvements in dynamic security as evidenced by the change in the numbers of assaults (Andersen & Skardhamar, 2015). In this way, the number of assaults could act as a proxy measure for changes in recidivism (French & Gendreau, 2006) and provide an indication of post-release behavior (Lahm, 2009).

Distance learning in prisons: UK and Australia

Prisoners in most Australian and UK jurisdictions are not permitted to access online learning technologies due to procedural restrictions prohibiting prisoner access to the internet. Formal education and training delivery to prisoners is currently provided in non-digital forms, usually in the form of blocks of printed text. Although this method enables access to course materials, it does not develop digital literacies in incarcerated students, and these skills are becoming more essential to pursue formal learning outside of prisons. Currently, there are few programs offered to incarcerated students that adequately prepare them for entry into higher education and even fewer that provide incarcerated students with the opportunity to use modern ICTs. In both the UK and Australia, there are innovative eLearning projects that are trying to equip prisoners with digital literacy skills in spite of the lack of internet access.

Many prisons in the UK make use of the Virtual Campus, a secure networked system that allows prisoner access to education and training. Using the Virtual Campus, prisoners can communicate with their university tutors via a secure messaging service or access a growing number of Open University courses via a 'Walled Garden'. The 'Walled Garden' is a secure version of the Open University's learning management system and enables students to interact with their online learning material while being prevented from accessing any other sites (Pike & Adams, 2012). By interacting directly with their studies and receiving rapid feedback from online assessments or from their tutors, prisoners can feel part of a wider learning community which enables them to more clearly identify with a positive, pro-social, student identity (Pike, 2014).

In Australia, the [*Making the Connection*](#) project undertaken by the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), is introducing a server with a version of the learning management system (a Moodle-based system called the *USQ Offline StudyDesk*) and notebook computers that are internet-independent into prisons in four states with discussions underway for widespread rollout across Australia (Farley, Pike & Hopkins, 2015). These technologies provide access to digital higher education for prisoners. The *Making the Connection* project team selected the following courses to be used with the USQ Offline StudyDesk and personal devices.

- 1. Tertiary Preparation Program:** Six courses from the Tertiary Preparation Program were selected for modification. These included general English and study skills courses, math courses and a humanities course. Successful completion of the Tertiary Preparation Program allows students automatic entry into selected USQ programs. This program is Commonwealth-funded enabling program and does not attract tuition fees.

- 2. Indigenous Higher Education Pathways Program:** Six courses have been adapted from this program as part of the *Making the Connection* project. It is expected that this program will prove popular given the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners and that Indigenous students are half as likely to have completed year 12 as non-Indigenous students. Again, this is a Commonwealth-funded enabling program for which students will not incur tuition fees.
- 3. Diploma of Arts (Social Sciences):** Eight courses will be modified with an emphasis on community welfare and development.
- 4. Diploma of Science:** This program will emphasize sustainability and the environment. Eight courses from this program will be modified.
- 5. Diploma of Business Administration:** Historical data shows that most incarcerated students have enrolled in business programs. Again, eight courses from this program will be modified.

Diploma programs were selected in acknowledgement of the typically short sentence length of most prisoners in Australia. It could reasonably be expected that some benefits, in terms of improved security, could still be achieved with these shorter programs. Also, it was decided that it would be more beneficial to offer a selection of courses across a range of disciplines, rather than concentrate course modification efforts around one discipline as with a single degree program.

To date, the *Making the Connection* project is deployed across 20 sites in Queensland, Western Australia, New South Wales and Tasmania. Negotiations are underway to roll the project out into the remaining Australian jurisdictions (the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria, South Australia, and the Northern Territory). So far, there have been some 576

enrolments in the project. The numbers are expected to increase rapidly as the project moves to other Australian jurisdictions. The sort of self-paced learning that the *Making the Connection* project allows could lead to reduced costs while promoting digital literacy skills needed for study or the workplace. This increased access to learning could help realize the benefits of reduced risk and decreased recidivism rates.

Conclusion

This article argues that provision of prison education may directly address the security risks of prisons by providing a mechanism to combat negative prison sub-culture and reduce prisoner assaults. A reduction in prisoner misconduct correlates strongly to a reduction in recidivism rates (Lahm, 2009). The literature suggests that prison education is almost twice as cost-effective as incarceration alone as a crime control policy (Bazos & Hausman, 2004). Investing public funds in education and training in prisons will achieve more sustainable community outcomes as compared to building prisons.

Previously education has been considered as a separate requirement, insufficiently linked to the RNR model of rehabilitation and reduced security risks. However, improved engagement with education and training and an associated reduction in the number of assaults in custody could potentially have many positive effects. It could decrease the number of workplace injury claims, absenteeism and turnover in prison officers. Physical and verbal abuse from prisoners is a significant component of the workplace stress experienced by prison officers, contributing to a high burden of stress-related chronic disease (Gould, Watson, Price, & Valliant, 2013).

Certainly, effective delivery of and prisoner engagement with education and training might mitigate the tensions and episodic violence typically experienced with prison overcrowding (United Voice, 2015). In the longer term, funding is likely to be returned to the public purse through taxes collected from ex-prisoners employed upon release from custody, decreased costs of health care as better educated people have improved health outcomes, the reduced cost of crime (including policing, sentencing, remand and incarceration) and decreased access to welfare by ex-prisoners (Levin, 2009).

This article particularly highlights two projects: one in Australia and one in the UK. In different ways, each project is introducing digital technologies into prisons to improve access to self-paced and higher level learning which enable prisoners to gain the cognitive and social skills they need for further study or work upon release from custody, while promoting pro-social behaviour and identity, potentially for desistance and for better societal integration.

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